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Everyday learning at work: communities of practice in TAFE

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Abstract

Ongoing restructuring, new types of students, changes in systems and the movement of staff within sections and institutes are only some of the daily challenges facing practitioners in many areas of TAFE as they grapple with the notion of organisational flexibility and customer responsiveness. This paper looks at how members of four workgroups based in two metropolitan institutes are dealing with challenges through informal learning.

This paper draws from preliminary findings of an Australian Research Council collaborative research project concerned with determining the significance of informal learning and its contribution to organisational performance. The project is currently midway through and has completed interviews and held feedback sessions with members of four workgroups undertaking quite different types of work. While the project is based in an educational organisation, the major focus of the research project is on TAFE as a workplace.

Wenger has written extensively on communities of practice and his work provides a new perspective for viewing learning occurring in workplaces (Wenger, 1998). This paper draws from Wenger's theoretical work and views the four workgroups from the point of view of *communities of practice*. In doing so, it enables many of the everyday work practices of the workgroups to be articulated as 'learning'. This offers potential for learning and development because it begins to foreground practices within TAFE that may foster informal learning environments and strengthen what is already occurring in these communities.

Introduction

Much money and effort is spent in Australian organisations to provide workplace training, yet the significance of the everyday learning that takes place at work is typically overlooked. Rather, this is often viewed as 'part of the job' or as a mechanism for 'doing the job properly' and is thus rendered invisible as 'learning'. While it is generally accepted that learning is critical for contemporary organisational effectiveness (eg de Geus, 1997; Senge, 1990), learning still tends to be thought about in terms of structured training. Very little is known about the everyday learning that takes place at work. The aim of this paper is to use a 'communities of practice' framework for exploring this form of learning at work (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). By drawing attention to the extent of the everyday learning and its significance in terms of 'getting the job done' we hope to promote further discussion on the way everyday learning at work might be enhanced.

The project

The Australian Research Council funded project 'Uncovering Learning in the Workplace' is a three-year research project that aims to explore the nature of informal learning and its significance to the workplace. This paper draws from early findings of this collaborative project between the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET).

The project involves two metropolitan TAFE institutes. Two workgroups from each of the institutes are collaborating with the research team throughout the project. The workgroups themselves represent diverse areas of TAFE, including a human resource unit, a team of managers responsible for planning, a unit delivering workplace training and a trade-teaching unit.

A multi-staged design is being employed in the project. In the first stage in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of each of the workgroups in order to draw out experiences of work and learning. Following stages involved discussions with the workgroups about key findings from the interviews. This provided a dual function of checking the validity of the initial findings as well as seeking input from each of the workgroups in terms of the specific direction of subsequent stages. The current final stage is examining particular learning themes within each group. The project is due for completion in late 2003.

The project is not intended to be an evaluation of workplace learning processes nor is it intended to make major changes in organisational matters or to judge and compare workgroups. Rather, its intention has been to explore the extent and nature of everyday learning at work and its contribution its significance to workplaces and how it might be utilised.

Communities of practice

There are many theoretical frameworks to draw from when examining workplace learning. With each perspective different aspects are privileged and others remain unseen. This paper uses Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of 'community of practice' as a way of exploring the everyday learning occurring in each of the project's four workgroups. According to Wenger (1998), social participation within a community of practice is the key to everyday learning. For example, Wenger stresses the importance of social practices and relationships of the workplace and their contribution to the creation of identity and meaning for organisational members. In this view, the community of practice both complements and can substitute for formal learning mechanisms. Lave and Wenger suggest fourteen characteristics that indicate the formation and existence of a community of practice These 'indicators' include social aspects of workplace relationships, identities, knowledges, understandings, language and language use (1998, pp 125-126).

As a component of the initial project stage, an analysis of interviews was carried out using the fourteen characteristics as a guide to examine if the workgroups displayed features of a community of practice. The four stories that follow focus on the relationships and social practices within each of the workgroups in light of the

fourteen Wenger indicators. The data informing these vignettes comes mainly from interviews with members of the workgroups.

Trade teaching unit

This workgroup is a well-established teaching unit that has worked together for more than ten years. The head teacher takes on the role of ‘filter’ and ‘protector’ managing the information flow to the unit and the learning of staff. It has been the head teacher’s role to master changes and effectively communicate them to the other staff members, as well as to master administrative demands in his own work role. Even though there is no formal stipulation that states that it is solely the head teacher’s responsibility to keep abreast of changes, there is a shared understanding between the workgroup that this role falls primarily to the head teacher. Other members of this workgroup feel little need to seek input outside their own unit but some do have informal contacts with their trade. For them, there appears to be minimal contact with other college staff aside from contact with fellow colleagues teaching the same courses at other colleges. However, this contact has a more social nature: for example members of the group talk about annual golf days with other similar units.

In recent years the unit’s learning has encompassed coming to grips with significant changes in curriculum imposed by the institution and national training agenda. Group members regarded the use of computers for both teaching and administrative purposes as prompting learning. Another area was the ongoing product changes within the industry itself. To accommodate this need the group invites industry specialists and other guests to visit their worksite to inform them about industry developments and products.

Staff members draw primarily on each other as resources for solving issues with students. Within the group there appears to be a shared way of doing things. Staff negotiations of this type are generally decided in weekly staff meetings and during daily lunchtime conversations. They also have devised an informal and equitable division of labour among themselves for administrative tasks such as the development of curriculum notes and specialist curriculum diagrams.

Management group

This workgroup comprises of relatively senior level managers. The team was recently formed with a primary purpose to develop and implement strategic planning initiatives across the institute. Most of the work relationships in this group are recent although some workgroup members have worked with each other in different contexts in the past.

While the mutual relationships appear mainly harmonious, the formation of longer term relationships tend to be interrupted at irregular intervals by group members moving into acting positions in other parts of the Institute, sometimes at physically distant locations or newcomers moving into the team in acting roles.

The manager of the team appears to have been instrumental in providing guidance, direction and feedback on the groups’ performance. He has also been the key resource in assisting the team with ‘negotiating the political’ which includes mastering the

organisational intricacies of the job as well as strategically guiding the team in dealing with strategic issues on the institute agenda.

Throughout the individual interviews most team members emphasised their confidence in the senior manager and referred positively to his managerial style, his wealth of organisational knowledge and outstanding ability at understanding organisational and political sensitivities.

A key area of learning essential for members of this group was mastering such sensitivities. This was particularly so around delicate issues, such as downsizing a department, satisfying industrial union requirements, or encouraging teachers to accept new assessment practices. Managing these important issues was among the biggest challenges faced by this group.

The primary activity in which the group jointly engages appears to be researching and solving problems regarding work issues within their own faculties. The group make references to how they draw from each other's knowledge and experiences to advise decisions in their respective domains.

Having said this, workplace issues, consultation and collaboration are not limited to simply within the workgroup: members of staff, and people outside the organisation are consulted. Members described directors, library staff, and former colleagues working in another positions and peers from another organisations among their learning networks.

Human resource unit

Another workgroup are from the employee services section of a human resource unit. The primary role of this group is the processing of payroll and leave applications across the institute. There are three hierarchical layers in this workgroup: clerks at various grades, a section manager and a unit manager. Despite this stratification, this unit possesses a strong team identity.

On a collective level, team members are aware of the unit's role in providing a service function to the institute. The relationships within the group are sustained and supportive. Interpersonal relationships appear to be harmonious with formal and informal social activities featuring as part of the working environment.

In interviews the group described themselves as a team. Group members referred to situations where work deadlines had to be met and all team members pitched in to complete tasks. Many also commented in interviews about the manager's willingness to undertake 'mundane' clerical tasks outside her 'normal' work.

The team engage in problem solving and team building activities at regular staff meetings and knowledge and information sharing occurs during formal and informal staff meetings. Information sharing among this group appears to be done on the basis of knowing where each other's work role fits in and how they each contribute to the enterprise. Team members understood their location within the hierarchy and how each other's role complements the whole.

A key area of learning for this group was that all staff members are encouraged to act in more senior positions and thus 'step outside their comfort zone'. The manager appears instrumental in encouraging staff members to extend themselves beyond their current roles by taking on acting roles and by becoming representatives on various institute committees that offer both new challenges and learning opportunities.

According to the staff of this unit, the learning of new procedures and/or new administrative systems is also initiated by the team leader, who is among the primary sources for dealing with unusual or difficult issues or problems. Other networks are also resourced as a means of information sharing and learning. For example, the unit manager referred to the establishment of an online human resources network in order to ensure consistency on the interpretation of new awards, conditions and change of policies.

Workplace learning group

This group is a relatively small and close-knit group responsible for conducting training activities on the premises of external clients. The group plans and conducts learning activities, which may involve some teaching and assessment, and describe themselves as responsive to the needs of the organisations in which they work. While the group consists of three teachers and a manager, the manager is not directly involved in the delivery of workplace learning. The manager, however, is seen as a close ally and supporter of the group.

Given the size of the group and their close working relationships with each other, it appears that there is a considerable amount of peer learning occurring. This is highly valued within the group and the small team describe a great deal of interactive problem solving and discussions taking place over informal cups of tea.

The group possesses a unique position within their institute. While they are not part of a TAFE Business Development Unit, they are an innovative commercial venture. This unique position was emphasised in terms of the tensions they encounter with respect to conforming to TAFE procedures while still maintaining customer responsiveness to business clients.

Given the function of this unit is to perform what might be described as 'innovative' within TAFE, the group describe limited precedents. This presents challenges for this group as well as tensions around simultaneously diverging from orthodox TAFE practices yet fulfilling orthodox accountability procedures.

Discussion

It is of little surprise that TAFE are already using a 'communities of practice' perspective. This methodology has been implemented through the ANTA funded Reframing the Future initiative and deals with issues relating to the National Training Implementation System (Mitchell & Young, 2002). Whilst this particular form of staff development might not strictly follow Lave and Wenger's original intention of communities of practice, it does have potential for TAFE personnel to insert new considerations into discussions around work practice. It can do this by recognizing the

importance of everyday learning and secondly by considering the conditions within workgroups that enhance informal learning: many of which might not be visible using a different framework.

Communities of practice and TAFE

An analysis of each of the TAFE workgroups from a 'communities of practice' perspective drew attention to many aspects of learning that may typically be taken for granted in workplaces. With the managers, for example, the importance of networking with others from both inside and outside the group was identified. Similarly the importance of learning to negotiate political aspects of work in terms of individual and workgroup success was also evident. Another example is focusing on 'knowing who was good at what' within the workgroup or the learning involved in 'acting up' as seen in trade and human resource workgroups. While these were things that workers thought important enough to talk about, their inclusion in contemporary professional development programs is likely to be limited. They may form part of the subtext of training, but are often not formally addressed. For example, a concern with staff tea-room facilities might never feature on the training agenda without it being first necessary to articulate and acknowledge its significant role in the facilitation of the exchange of workplace stories and consequent fostering of workplace learning (as seen clearly with another of these groups). A final example here might be the value of networks, which is clearly evident with many of these groups, although the structures of these networks themselves are often less than clear.

While these project findings are embryonic, they do begin to give rise to questions around their possible impact for enhancing workplace learning. For those who organise workgroups they may begin to draw out potential and new areas for consideration. Could enhancing workgroups require new and different ways to think about the development and maintenance of work relationships? How might networks (both within and outside the organisation) be extended? What about the importance and issues around multi-membership? How might a large government training institution support the creation of opportunities for informal interactions? Clearly it is too early to answer these questions, but their emergence requires noting and further debate.

Situated 'communities of practice' and the project

A community of practice perspective highlights the local and situated nature of learning across each of the workgroups. Despite belonging to a large government training institution each of the workgroups exhibited a unique context and learning experience. For example, negotiating the political was recognised as being a key competence by the strategic planners whereas the trade-teachers did not consider this type of learning relevant in their workgroup. The recognition of the local and situated nature of learning has been integrated into the methodology of the Uncovering Learning project. Rather than 'rolling out' a pre-set learning intervention with each of the workgroups, individual projects have been developed in collaboration with workgroup members.

While we have found value in the communities of practice perspective, we are cautious in advocating formal interventions that aim to create such communities. They

operate in informal ways and members often find them of value because they are not part of the formal structure. In other publications we also examine the limitations of such a framework for conceptualising informal learning at work and explore other ideas that may be useful ways of framing such learning (Boud and Middleton, accepted for publication).

Conclusion

By drawing attention to the extent of the everyday learning in these workgroups and its significance in terms of 'getting the job done' we hope to promote further discussion on the way everyday learning at work might be enhanced. It has been suggested that a broader understanding of work and learning is required if learning at work is to be enhanced. This broader understanding may be partially brought about through the opening up of new possibilities and the insertion of new players and new sites into the discussions. The emphasis on work practices that contribute to learning may suggest the value in structuring workplaces so that opportunities for informal interaction can be facilitated.

While money and effort is spent providing workplace training everyday learning is generally rendered invisible. Learning still tends to be thought and talked about in terms of structured training and little is understood about learning in everyday work. The aim of this paper was to use a 'communities of practice' to explore everyday learning. This is done in the hope of promoting further discussion on the way everyday learning at work might (or might not) be enhanced. This may be more about *unengineering* and leaving open legitimate spaces for the messy business of everyday learning to occur. Formal interventions change the nature of informal learning, not necessarily for the better. A better understanding of such learning will enable training and organisational change initiatives to proceed more effectively.

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